

The University of Chicago

ISOLATIONIST PROPAGANDA

SEPTEMBER 1, 1939, TO DECEMBER 7, 1941

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1943

By

WILLIAM CECIL ROGERS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY AND PREDICTIONS

Summary

It is generally accepted, at least among scholars, that if there is to be lasting peace the United States must cooperate in world organization. In America the isolationists have opposed American cooperation of this nature, and there is good reason to believe that they will oppose a workable peace plan when this war is ended.

The purpose of this study has been to throw light on isolationist propaganda by studying the period of its most recent activity; from September 1, 1929, to December 7, 1941. This period was considered of special historical interest, and information about the isolationists at that time was thought to be of value in predicting their future activity during the period when a peace plan is under consideration.

A definition of isolationists which was proposed is as follows:

"Isolationist" is the term here applied to people, who during the period studied, opposed the administration's policy of "all out aid" to the Allies. This opposition implied that they did not believe the world had shrunk to the point where world events could threaten the security of the United States, or did realize it but thought it impractical to regulate these events. The definition is limited strictly to the period studied.

The Gallup polls showed that the Middle West was the most isolationist part of the country although there was only 11 per cent more in that section than in the most interventionist region which was the South. The middle western isolationists were the most vocal, however.

Several categories of isolationists were set up. The first group consisted of those who feared the New Deal more than Germany. The second group were those who disliked England so much that they opposed American aid to her. A third were those who feared the effect of war on their economic status, and a fourth had certain

positive ideals that would be disturbed by war. A fifth group merely found it expedient to be isolationist.

In Chapter 11, the isolationist campaign was described for the twenty-seven months of its duration. This period was divided into five parts for purposes of clarity. Certain events and series of events seemed to divide the periods. These periods were: (1) from the outbreak of the war to the "sitzkrieg," (2) from the "sitzkrieg" to the "blitzkrieg," (3) through the "blitzkrieg," (4) the Lend Lease period, and (5) from the passage of the Lend Lease bill to Pearl Harbor.

The main event in the first period was the fight over the lifting of the arms embargo. From the time of Munich, Americans had turned away from the isolation of the twenties and thirties and expressed a willingness to help the Allies against Germany. The isolationists were still quite strong, however, and it took thirty-six days for the Senate to lift the embargo. A huge amount of mail poured into Congress which opposed the revision by more than five to one. Although the isolationists were in a minority of about 24 per cent, they showed their vocality at the very beginning of their campaign against intervention. The great majority of the press, however, was calling for revision.

During this period, the isolationists used most of the appeals they developed after the last war. The professional peace groups were marshalling their forces and putting up a strong fight. Although most Americans wanted to help England, the country was determined to stay out of war, and the administration's main argument for revision was that it was the best way to accomplish this aim.

The strategy of the isolationists seemed to be one of delay. They hoped that if they could prolong the debate something would happen here or in Europe which would decide the issue in their favor. They also hoped by delay to have their ideas take hold or have people lose interest in intervention.

Although Congress passed the revision, the administration had to compromise and be very cautious in its propaganda. The isolationists managed to form their lines and put up a very strong fight. At this time it seemed that it would be a long time before Congress would be willing to declare war.

In the second period, the war in Europe settled down to what was commonly called a "sitzkrieg" or "a phony war." The fronts

were inactive and many thought it would be a war of attrition. Public attention turned away from Europe, and the isolationists were relatively quiet.

The third period covered the time from April 9th when the Germans began their "blitzkrieg" by invading Denmark and Norway to December 29th when the President proposed the Lend Lease plan. During this period, most Americans lost their sense of security, and it was feared that the Germans would win the war.

The Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies was formed in May, 1940, for the purpose of mobilizing opinion for aid to England. The isolationists fought this growing desire with all their energy. They told the people that such aid would involve the nation in war, that it was too late to save England, and that we should keep our arms for our own defense. President Roosevelt's reelection was opposed by them because they believed, if elected, he would "plunge the Nation into war." The majority, however, supported the draft bill, the destroyer transfer, and the election of Roosevelt.

By the turn of the year, the majority wanted more extensive aid to England. The President introduced the Lend Lease bill which in effect committed America to a British victory. The isolationists waged their biggest fight during the period from December 29th to March 13th when the bill was finally passed. The isolationist battle was one of the most bitter legislative fights in history. This was due, in large part, to the bitterness generated by the presidential election and the extreme effectiveness with which the America First Committee organized the isolationists.

The isolationists' propaganda against the bill was centered about three appeals. These were: (1) the bill meant dictatorship, (2) the bill meant war, and (3) England did not really need so much help. America First organized large rallies and huge letter-writing campaigns against the bill. Congressional isolationists worked closely with the isolationists out of Congress who, by this time, were effectively organized by America First.

Although the isolationist strength came from the Republicans, the isolationists in Congress were lead by Senator Burton Wheeler, a Democrat. The administration was determined to let the minority group talk as much as it chose without censure. Public opinion had reacted strongly to presidential criticism of isolationist personalities, and the isolationists were quick to make

effective use of the martyr's role whenever they felt themselves persecuted. It soon appeared that the isolationists were ready to talk a long time in Congress in accordance with their strategy of delay. The public, however, became impatient, and the bill was finally passed, two months after it was introduced.

The isolationists exhibited a great deal of power and vigor in this period. They made use of every propaganda method and were able to mobilize into action a large part of those who were isolationists. They indicated to the President that there was no true national unity and probably convinced him that he should move slowly. They developed their organization into a well-oiled machine, although they were never again able to show as much strenght.

After the passage of the Lend Lease bill, there was a steady progression of acts which drew America closer and closer to active participation in the war. The public grew to believe that this was necessary, and the isolationists grew exceedingly bitter as they realized the difficulty of stopping the trend. Realizing that they could hope for no more converts to their cause and that people were becoming more interventionist, the isolationists concentrated on increasing the intensity of belief and activity of their followers.

Isolationist propaganda increased in intensity and bitterness. It became obvious that the fascists in America were furnishing an increasing amount of the strength and leadership of the movement, and this served to discredit the isolationists. As time went on, some of the respectable leaders dropped out of the movement because of this factor. The leading isolationist figure, Charles Lindbergh, condemned the Jews in a speech in September, 1941, which climaxed this trend.

The isolationists were, by this time, concentrating on bitter attacks against the President, England and Russia, and the interventionists to the exclusion of most of their former arguments. America First threatened to organize itself to oppose the election of interventionists in the next election. Pearl Harbor found the isolationists diminished greatly in numbers but in an exceptionally bitter frame of mind.

The isolationists depended on a few large newspapers for the bulk of their propaganda. The largest of these were analyzed for the whole period of the campaign. The papers thus studied were the Chicago Tribune, the New York News, and the Chicago Herald

American as a representative of the isolationist Hearst chain.

Research methods were chosen that would present data about the quantity, intensity, and techniques of presentation and the arguments of the propaganda in time. Each unit read was classified as to date of appearance and was given one of three intensity ratings (weak, medium, and strong). By weighting these ratings 1, 2, and 3, a line graph was established which was drawn under the quantity graph for each publication. The seven propaganda techniques of the Institute of Propaganda Analysis were chosen for classifying the units according to the propaganda techniques used in presenting the arguments. They were chosen because they made fairly reliable distinction and were well-adapted to such an extensive study. (Over 2,500 items were classified in the Tribune alone.)

Eight basic propaganda arguments were developed by combining all the appeals used into inclusive categories. The eight argument classifications developed follow: (1) anti-administration, (2) anti-foreign, (3) anti-interventionists, (4) support-for-isolation, (5) our-ideals-and-traditions, (6) disillusionment-with-the-last-war, (7) we-can-defend-America, and (8) war-and-its-aftermaths-are-bad.

There was a close relation between these arguments and the techniques used. For instance, the first three arguments which were the most frequently used were presented with the name-calling technique.

The Chicago Tribune ran more editorials and cartoons on the subject of isolation than the New York News and the Chicago Herald American combined. In addition, it used its news columns for isolationist propaganda to a much greater extent than any other daily newspaper in America. The Tribune's analysis of the issue of intervention was that the New Deal was trying to take the country into war so that it could establish a communistic dictatorship and that it was supported in this attempt by communists and "wealthy colonials." It further stated that the country was in no danger from abroad. The Tribune's propaganda was considered very effective, but like other papers it probably made few converts. It did intensify the belief of those who agreed with it and lessened the intensity of those who disagreed.

The quantity of isolationist cartoons and editorials in the Tribune was greatest at times when public attention was cen-

tered most heavily on some aspect of intervention. The peaks came in September and October of 1939 when the arms embargo revision was debated; in June, 1940, when France was being invaded; in February, 1941, at the height of the Lend Lease battle; and in the last months of 1941 when Russia was being invaded and when the President was taking important steps to aid the Allies. At these times it was important for the isolationists to emit large quantities of propaganda because decisions were being made on foreign policy.

The Tribune like other publications made large numbers of negative attitude statements in regard to England. These were most frequent before June, 1940, and after June, 1941. In these two periods England was relatively safe from invasion. Between these periods England was in great danger, and attacks on England would not have been as acceptable to a public that was in deep sympathy with England.

The most popular propaganda techniques in the Tribune were the name-calling and card-stacking devices. These were the favorite techniques used by most of the isolationist publications. The nature of the arguments used seemed to have eliminated most of the other devices.

The anti-administration, anti-foreign, and anti-interventionists arguments respectively were the most used in the Tribune and accounted for 67 per cent of the total for that paper. The Tribune was slightly less intense in proportion to quantity than the other two newspapers studied but because of its large number of units, it actually published a larger number of intense units than either of the other two papers.

The Tribune's news columns differed markedly from its editorials and cartoons in quantitative distribution of techniques and arguments. This was true because of the differences as to content and source between news and items appearing on the editorial page. The quantity of news articles printed was determined more by events than was the case of cartoons and editorials. The news graph reached by far its highest peak during the Lend Lease period and declined considerably after that time while the editorial and cartoon graph reached even higher peaks. It was reasoned that this was due to the fact that the news columns mirrored isolationist activity in the country as a whole while the editorial expressions mirrored the feelings of the publisher more closely.

The publisher of the Tribune became more active as the nation became more interventionist and the isolationist movement declined.

In the first two months the Tribune used over 90 per cent of the main isolationist arguments employed in the whole twenty-seven months of isolationist activity. Because of the huge amount of space the Tribune gave to isolationist propaganda, the excellence of its propaganda, the vehemence with which it fought, and its large circulation in the most isolationist area of the country, the idea was advanced that the Tribune was the most influential isolationist propaganda source of the whole movement.

The Chicago Herald American as a representative of the Hearst chain was a much different type of newspaper than the Tribune. Like the New York News it was sensational in tone and content and devoted much less space to political news and comment. The Herald American had its highest quantitative peak during the Lend Lease period and declined after that date in contrast to the increase in the Tribune's quantity. The Herald American seemed less interested in the isolationist campaign than the Tribune.

The Herald American laid great stress on the name-calling technique and used it over half the time which was also the case with the New York News. This device was the most emotional of the seven devices used, and the extensive use of the technique would seem to be related to the emotional and sensational tone of the two papers. The three most important arguments were the anti-administration, anti-foreign, and the our-ideals-and-traditions argument. The last argument was used frequently because of the "flag waving" character of the Hearst papers.

The Herald American was rather indirect in its approach and was not considered as influential as the other two papers. The principal contribution to isolationist propaganda of the Hearst papers seems to have been their development of the "Mothers Groups" which played an important part in the isolationist campaign.

The tabloid New York News seems to have opposed intervention because of its antipathy for England and its fear of the human losses of war rather than because of its fear of social-economic change as was the case with the other papers. All three feared a loss of United States sovereignty as a result of a possible war. The quantity pattern of the News was approximately the same as the Tribune. The main arguments of the News were as follows: anti-foreign 28 per cent (almost all anti-British); anti-administration

20 per cent; and war-and-its-aftermath-are-bad 15 per cent. Although the News had the largest circulation of any paper in the country, it was probably not as influential as might be expected because it printed little political matter and because it was liberal in its outlook while the isolationists' strength was conservative. It contributed much of the "macabre" propaganda used by the isolationists.

Propaganda media studied in addition to newspapers were magazines, radio, and books. Fascist propaganda was considered separately. The isolationists had a smaller share of these media than they had of newspapers. The Saturday Evening Post the Scribner's Commentator, and the Christian Century were the only important isolationist magazines, and the share of radio time was in proportion to their numerical strength which was only around 24 per cent of the population. There were few isolationist books because there is reason to believe that the people who wrote books on international affairs were almost entirely interventionists. The books were treated by giving conventional reviews, but the other media were analyzed by the same methods as the newspapers.

The Saturday Evening Post was more moderate in intensity, techniques, and arguments than any other publication studied. This was largely due to the fact that it was under severe competition and was going to a huge mass audience that was primarily interventionist. Except for November, 1941, the Post had its largest quantitative peaks in 1939 and 1940; in this it was different from all the other publications. It was politically very conservative, and its main arguments were anti-administration 25 per cent; disillusionment-with-the-last-war 18 per cent; and we-can-defend-America 16 per cent. The Post made a very small contribution to isolationist propaganda although its influence was great because of its large circulation (over three million).

The Commentator, which was subscribed to by only the most ardent isolationists, was very extreme in its propaganda and was published by a group of fascists. It was very intense and over half of its articles were isolationist in 1941. It had a higher percentage of anti-interventionist arguments than any of the other publications (24 per cent). It had only around twenty thousand readers, however, and its influence was not great.

The Christian Century was the most influential religious publication in the United States, and its propaganda was very in-

tense and quite extreme. It was strongly anti-British and used a high percentage of name-calling techniques (40 per cent). It was a liberal publication and feared the social effects of war.

The radio differed from other publications mainly because of the larger variety of arguments it used. This fact was attributed to the varied group that spoke over the radio.

A fascist was defined in the study as one who states publicly that the Jews as a group act as a political force opposed to the good of the people. In addition, it was held that a fascist must fulfill some of the following characteristics: be opposed to the principle that those who determine the policies of the nation should be elected by universal suffrage, be strongly opposed to labor unions, be sympathetic to fascist nations and opposed to democratic ones, and be extremely opposed to the broadening of economic and social democracy and to "communism."

The number of active fascists in the United States was estimated at two hundred thousand. These people were extremely active politically, however, and had an influence quite out of proportion to their numbers because of this fact. The fascist papers with the exception of Social Justice were very limited in circulation. They used the conventional arguments but used them much more frequently and intensively, and the content was very much more extreme.

From the evidence available it was decided that the propaganda directed at the United States from Germany added very little to the isolationist movement. This was because American sources furnished much more effective propaganda at an earlier date. The effect of "news" from Germany was not determined but it must have been much more influential than material that was readily identifiable as propaganda.

The isolationist organizations directed the activity of the isolationists into the most effective political channels. The America First Committee dwarfed all the other organizations. The great mass of the active isolationists belonged to this organization of around five hundred thousand members. The other isolationist organizations grouped to the right and left (in the political sense) of America First probably accounted for only around fifty thousand members many of whom also belonged individually to America First.

The America First Committee had a group of respectable

people, who were well-known, acting as a "front." Only a few of these, who were highly conservative politically, had an active part in directing the organization. The organization had around four hundred autonomous chapters loosely held together by bulletin issued from a national headquarters which directed their activities.

The main purpose of the organization was to influence Congress directly by controlled waves of letters from its members and indirectly by large mass meetings which it sponsored in all sections of the country with the exception of the strongly interventionist South.

The America First was very secretive about its activities, exaggerated its numerical strength, and underestimated the amount of money it spent. It undoubtedly spent much more than the \$37,000 it claimed. In one operation it paid for one million post cards.

America First used all the conventional lobbying devices and mailed out hundreds of thousands of pamphlets containing speeches and various arguments. Most of this propaganda was not original with the organization but was collected from other sources. The national office produced more moderate propaganda than that of individual chapters.

Members of America First seemed to be largely middle-class. All the fascist groups in the country flocked to the organization since it offered them the respectability which they had never before had. Once in, they managed to increase their numbers and in many cases gave America First activities their own coloration. As time went on they gained more power in the organization; this led to resignations on the part of its respectable "front" with resulting great harm to the movement. Since it was already suspected of being subversive by a large part of the population, this activity added fuel to these suspicions. The America First Committee was in large part responsible for the strength of the isolationist campaign.

The small isolationist organizations were liberal and pacifist like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom or conservative and extreme like the No Foreign War Committee. The first group had its beginnings after the last war. The latter group was founded after World War II started in order to channel the activities of those who thought America First was too conservative in its activities. These organizations supplemented the work

of America First but did not add greatly to the strength of the isolationist campaign.

The isolationist leaders were about evenly divided in numbers and prominence between Congress and private citizens. Those out of Congress were divided between those that were liberal and pacifist and those who were conservative. The conservatives were most important in the movement. The idealists lent a moral tone to the movement as their main contribution.

Charles A. Lindbergh was the leading non-congressional isolationist and Senator Wheeler was the leading isolationist member of Congress. Lindbergh preached the inevitability of an Axis victory, and Wheeler centered his attacks on the President. For the most part, the conservative leaders were "hard-headed business men" who felt that war would be bad for capitalism.

Robert Maynard Hutchins was the leading member of the idealist-isolationist group whose main idea was that war was brutal and would stop progress.

Senators Wheeler, Nye, LaFollette, and Taft and Representative Fish were the leading isolationist leaders in Congress. Some of the isolationists in Congress were probably isolationist because of party considerations. Most worked closely with America First.

The isolationist movement failed because it was clear to most people that it was more important to stop Hitler than to keep out of war. The isolationists were exceptionally vocal and bitter and got much more attention for these reasons than their numbers warranted. Undoubtedly they managed to hold up the progress of America's preparation for war on both the foreign and domestic fronts.

TRIBUNE CARTOONS AND EDITORIALS COMBINED
(total 1592)

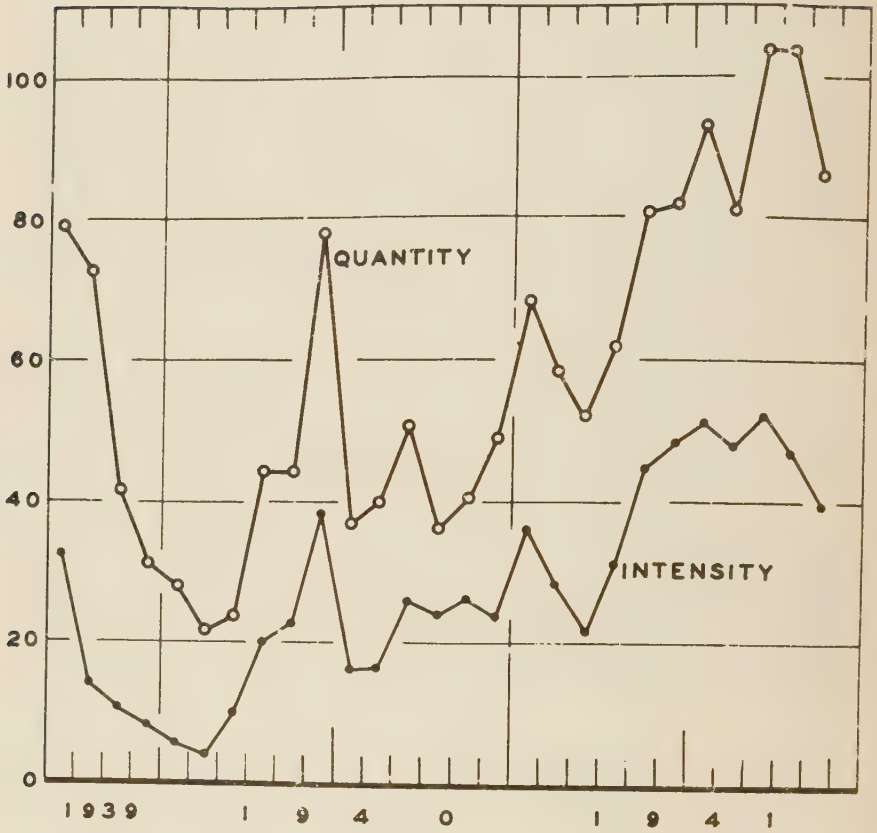


Fig. 3

THE COMMENTATOR
(181 Items)

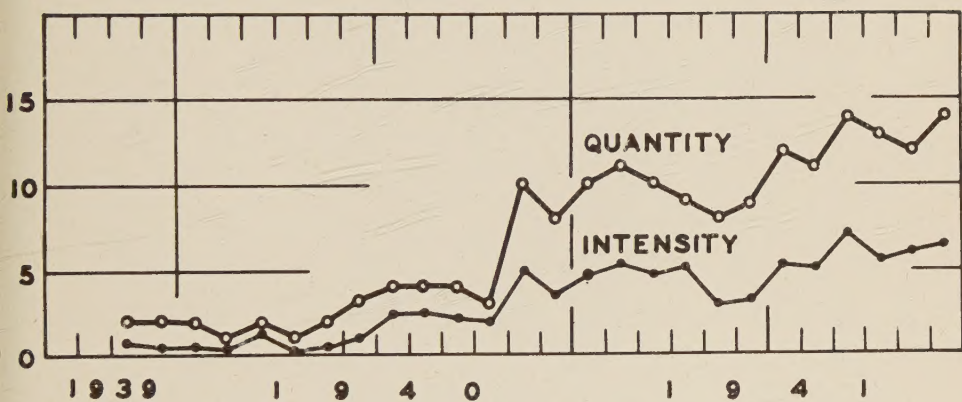


Fig. 7

